



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

NEWS RELEASE

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Food Pantries Notified About Lead Fragments Discovered in Donated Ground Venison

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Health, Game and Fish, and Agriculture departments are advising food pantries across the state not to distribute or use donated ground venison because of the potential for contamination with lead fragments.

Earlier this year, Dr. William Cornatzer, a Bismarck physician and hunter, contacted the Department of Health with concerns about the potential of lead fragments from bullets in ground venison. Dr. Cornatzer collected 95 packages of ground venison donated for food pantries. Of those, X-rays detected the presence of metal in 53 packages. The Department of Health recently took five samples targeting the metal pieces, all five of which tested strongly positive for lead.

“We know that swallowing lead can cause serious health problems for young children,” said Sandi Washek, Lead Program coordinator for the Department of Health. “Most of the health concerns traditionally have been connected with lead paint in the children’s environments. At this time, we do not know if lead particles in wild game are a significant health issue in North Dakota, but because of the seriousness of lead poisoning, especially for children and pregnant women, we are taking precautionary measures by recommending that food pantries not distribute the ground venison remaining in their possession.”

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Much of the venison that was tested was donated to food pantries through the Sportsmen Against Hunger program administered by North Dakota Community Action, a program that serves low-income families across the state.

“We want to thank processors and hunters for donating venison to this important program,” Washek said. “We appreciate the generosity of everyone involved and encourage their future participation. By working together, we can help protect our children by keeping lead out of venison and still provide a valuable donation to the food pantries in North Dakota.”

The Department of Agriculture sent a letter to all state- and federal-inspected meat processing plants in North Dakota informing them about the situation, and the Department of Health sent a letter to food pantries with recommendations for disposing of the meat. Additional studies concerning lead in wild game and lead levels in children are being planned by the Department of Health. In addition, the Game and Fish, Health, and Agriculture departments are working to develop guidance about how to properly clean and dress wild game to reduce the chances of lead in meat.

“Guidelines are being developed and should be ready by next hunting season to help eliminate lead in processed game,” said Dr. Andrea Grondahl, director of the Department of Agriculture’s State Meat and Poultry Inspection Program, which regulates custom-exempt meat plants. “We know that both hunters and processors want to participate in food pantry programs, and the new guidelines will help keep the meat they donate safe.”

Lead can be harmful to both children and adults, but children 6 and younger and pregnant women are at greater risk for lead poisoning. Most lead pieces should have been removed from wild game during the dressing process by discarding all bullet-damaged meat. According to the Department of Health, people who have concerns about how their wild game was cleaned and processed should not serve it to children and may decide whether to eat it themselves.

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